

MONASTERY OF ST. GERASIMUS OF THE JORDAN

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The 5th Century Greek Orthodox monastery is located close to the north side of the Dead Sea, and is one of the earliest monasteries in the area. Also known as 'Deir Hijla' in Arabic, the monastery was founded in 455 AD by Saint Gerasimus, a monk from Lycia in modern-day Anatolia, Turkey.

Saint Gerasimus was an Abbot of a community of 70 monks in the area east of Jericho and used to maintain a strict rule of asceticism. He's regarded as one of the second-generation leaders of the Judean desert hermits, who followed the founders Euthymius and Chariton.

The encounter of St. Gerasimus with the lion is a central theme in the paintings and sculptures in the monastery. According to tradition, the Abbot met the lion near the Jordan river, roaring in pain because of a thorn was stuck in its paw. After removing the thorn, the lion became tamed and joined the community (of the hermits). The lion is often illustrated with a donkey and camel, its friends from the Monastery.

The saint, also known as St. Gerasimus of the Jordan, died in 475 and his burial place remains unknown due to the destruction of the Byzantine structure. Our Greek Orthodox Patriarchate holds an annual Feast for the Saint at his monastery in the Judean desert on March 4/18.

The monastery of St. Gerasimus was built in the form of a Lavra, meaning that a cluster of caves and cells are built for the hermits while keeping a common center. The monks would

meet in the center on Saturdays and Sundays, while on the rest of the days they would live in seclusion. This form of Lavra was also established in the Judean desert monastery of Mar Saba as well as other places in the Judean desert.

Near the monastery are the ruins of the Biblical city of Beth Hogla. This city, which was recently excavated and seen near the highway, was located on the border between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Joshua 15 1, 6: "This then was the lot of the tribe of the children of Judah by their families...And the border went up to Bethhogla, and passed along by the north of Betharabah". And Joshua 18 19-20: "And the border passed along to the side of Bethhogla northward: and the outgoings of the border were at the north bay of the salt sea at the south end of Jordan: this was the south coast. And Jordan was the border of it on the east side. This was the inheritance of the children of Benjamin, by the coasts thereof round about, according to their families".

The original structure was built in 460, but was destroyed during the Persian conquest in 614, where all the monks were butchered. Their remains can be seen inside the monastery enclosed within glass frames in the crypt on the lower floor.

Crusaders later rebuilt the monastery, and most of the existing structure dates to the 13th century. Since that time, the monastery went under frequent rebuilding and reconstructions due to different reasons including periodic earthquakes, including the severe earthquake of 1837.

Most recently, the area around the monastery underwent a restoration, in 2009. Today, the monastery is a very vibrant place where it hosts thousands of pilgrims every year, and includes a spring and dozens of palm trees, which are used to supply the basic needs of the hermits.